

STUCK! In My Own Mind

by psearah

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Summary: "Without even thinking, I ran up the steps across from the door. Saito called after me, followed by the sound of shredding flash. I couldn't turn back to look though, because I knew exactly where I was headed. I ran upstairs, to one of the rooms where..."

1. HEAR! About This Later

The walls were thick, but withered slightly in the bathroom. The landlord clearly hadn't taken moisture into account when he'd last painted it, and the coats were peeling slightly. Warm droplets of water hit the walls, where the shower curtain had been momentarily pulled back to grab a bottle of conditioner. I smoothed it over my long hair and turned the shower head off, then opened the window on the adjacent wall. Laying down in the nearly full bath created by (accidental) plugging of the drain, I could stare out into the street. It was summer break, and the large, grassy median in the middle of our street was home to trees and elementary students for a couple of months. I pulled the pack of cigars from the window sill and lit one up. A bad habit, I suppose. Cancer ran in my family anyway, might as well increase my chances of dying sooner in one way or another. A knock sounded on the door, "_Are you smoking in there again_?"

It was Mum, always the worrier. I turned on the shower radio and started belting whatever words made it from head to mouth first. She must have not done much more than sigh and leave. The breeze rushed in through the window, so I sunk beneath the hot water for a couple seconds, cig hand safe in the air. It wasn't that I didn't care what my parent's thought of me, I just didn't want to care. I cared, but I didn't want to any more than I needed to. Nothing more than needed. I felt the coolness drip over my arms more than anything at these times. Things were quiet in the house for once and I let myself sink under the water again while the light in the room flickered softly in

the distance.

JANUARY 1864

It was dark again when I woke up. The air was chilly, made worse by my wet hair. I couldn't open my eyelids or really feel anything, in that horrible stage between sleep and actually waking up. The first thing I felt was a hand on my bare shoulder, shaking. I swear I could have killed, if I could move. Perhaps I was dreaming. Fabric draped over my body and that was when I first realized I wasn't in my bathtub anymore. A voice spoke out to me, but it was in another language, completely indecipherable. My eyes finally did what they were supposed to, and met those of a person in strange robe-like clothes; Japanese hakama and whatever top was worn with them it looked like. On closer look, a girl. I took a moment to look past her while she continued trying to communicate with me, and then around at all the small, wooden buildings, dirt roads— In most cases, this would be the time to make that one overly cliché reference to Wizard of Oz and pretend like nothing in the world was really wrong. _But, where am I? _"Hey!"

I glanced behind the girl who spun around to meet the three men in similar clothing, katana held at their hips and ready to be drawn at any moment. I never saw her reach for the sword at her own hip. The girl and the leader of the group seemed to exchange words and I found myself feeling like I had been here before in a similar situation. Without warning, the girl turned around and grabbed my wrist, dragging me away as fast as both our legs could carry us. I fought to hold the material around me with my only free hand while we kicked up the dirt behind us. What the hell was going on? We ducked into an alley all of a sudden, where she spared me a short glance and a couple of words. I nodded when she finished. She led us once more to an arrangement of wooden planks, where it seemed safe to hide until we were absolutely sure the men were gone. I slipped my arms through the fabric, finding it to be some sort of long coat.

It was silent between us for what seemed like hours. The girl placed her finger to her lips to signal me to be quiet, and stepped out of the shelter. Right after, blood curdling screams wretched from the voices of a few men all at once. It seemed so close. There was more talking and yelling from more men, and then the same screams and the indescribable sound that could only be tearing flesh. The girl seemed to flinch at every noise. It suddenly stopped, and we both looked up to the source of a shadow cast over our little roof. I could only see blue and the end of what must have been a long sword. Had we been noticed? The man stepped away from us, and another scream echoed, but more like a laugh as the slick sound of metal through skin accompanied. There was so much blood, I was sure I could smell it all around me. The girl seemed to whisper something to herself, eyes downcast and hidden by bangs. She moved to run maybe, but the wood came crashing all around us and alerted the blue-coats to where we were. Now, being able to see them entirely, the only thing about them that stuck with me was their eyes, red as the blood they seemed to crave. _Furies? _It crossed my mind for a second, but I rid myself of that theory as quick as it had appeared.

The girl grabbed my wrist again, but we didn't move. Surely she hadn't given up just yet, she had swords; couldn't she use them? Something caught the light of the moon right in front of us. It was more swords, and more men in the same coats but they seemed

different. They were human, without the red tints in their eyes. While they made quick conversation with each other, I studied them separately. The one closest to us had a glint in his eyes, so green they practically glowed in the moonlight. His hair must have been longer, but he held it up at the very back of his head. The other hung back and seemed much calmer than his companion. His hair was much longer than the other, and so black it was nearly violet. Their eyes finally met ours. The change in conversation seemed to make the girl even more on edge. I felt strange as her grip intensified around my wrist. A third man came in front of the others, his sword extended dangerously at our forms. There was no trace of mercy in his eyes. He only spoke a few words directly to us, but his voice was ice in my ears. The girl nodded tentatively at something he said, and the man put his swords away. The one with his hair pulled back barked something at the both of us and the girl bowed at what must have been a perfect ninety-degree-angle and muttered something small under her breath. I couldn't follow her action, too shocked at being directly addressed by the forward swordsman. He glared over my head and said something very slowly, as if trying to get me to understand. He exchanged some words with the others and repeated the same thing again, or it sounded like it. I couldn't just say nothing with the girl probably getting lightheaded from staying in the same position, so I spoke as clearly as I possibly could in a dark alley with dead people, "_E-English, I speak English. I don't know what you're trying to say_."

If the short-tempered one wasn't lit up enough, he certainly was now. He exchanged some more words with the others while the girl recovered from her intense politeness. All at once, we were grabbed by a man each, and led into the street without much force. I kind of figured we both saw something we weren't meant to back in that alley, so if we were to continue breathing the air of wherever we were, I should comply as best as possible. Especially with the language barrier.

We walked not very long, before we reached a compound of sorts made in a traditional Japanese style. It was pretty nice, for being lived in by a bunch of men with swords who went around killing people, or whatever those things were. My head was buzzing still, and I couldn't even remember which direction we'd come from when a couple of guards greeted us at the gate and swiftly led us through to a nearly empty room. One man kept us close to the wall and bound our hands and feet to keep us from escaping, another made beds on the floor. We were both placed in one on opposite sides of the room and left to lay there. The girl spoke a few words but soon realized I wouldn't be able to respond properly and turned her head away.

2. WONDER! Where The Hell I Am

Author's Note: Okay, let's try this again! There were some issues with coding and a couple other things that some of you reviewed and/or PM'ed me about when these chapters were first posted so I'm hoping that this time, everything will go smoothly! I apologize for my errors! Please enjoy~

* * *

><p>CHAPTER ONE<p>

When I woke up early the next morning, my body was sore from being bound in the same position overnight. I normally toss and turn in my sleep so the blankets had been completely mussed with. A man walked in just as the girl opened her eyes. He was older with a balding head and looked almost frail, but the way he carried himself and the sword on his hip spoke otherwise. He said a few words in a way that instantly calmed me, and proceeded to release the ropes around our legs and loosen the ones that bound our arms together. The short-tempered one must have been out to show his knot tying skills.

We followed the man into a common area, where the men we had seen last night and more were sitting around the room. My eyes fell on the calmest one who was nearly in a corner. We locked eyes for no more than a second before the chattering began. The calm one spoke amongst the laughter a bit with a small smile on his face. My face scrunched up a bit at not being able to understand why everyone was laughing all of a sudden. The one who seemed like the leader of the group spoke only briefly, but the entire room quieted, broken by three men who seemed to form a sort of clique of their own. It shocked me to see that one of them had to be younger than I was.

It was easy to go off into my own mind while the others talked with each other about whatever it was. The conversation drifted so much from one person talking after another, it was difficult just moving my head 'round to look at them all. The older man who had taken us into the room placed a hand on my shoulder, causing me to realize just how quiet the room had become again. All eyes were on me. Oh yeah, stare at the girl who couldn't talk. The one who seemed in charge of the meeting spoke slowly, but I didn't catch a word of what he was saying to me. "_I'm sorry, but I really don't speak anything other than English."_

I felt rude for interrupting him, but the room seemed to ease with a few chuckles here and there so I blushed while the leader ran a hand over his forehead and used the same hand to gesture to himself, "Hijikata Toshizo", and then to the group, "Shi-n-se-n-gu-mi."

Familiar, way too familiar. The similarities were far too much to even begin with, but how could it be possible? That was a completely different time, and even then, the real timeline wasn't even close to that of the anime! My eyes grew wide and jolted around the room, placing names to faces and matching what was happening at this very second to hours of completing a video game and curious Wikipedia research and dare I admit, fan fiction. How in any way could I actually be in the 1800's with the legendary Shinsengumi in what seemed to be a fictional timeline? Was this one of those weird dreams that you have for fifteen second but it seems to last forever? I brought my hands together and pinched a palm. Pain, so it must be real, but still.

They had soon after taken us back to the room and left us there for a few days, only coming in to bring the girls—"I mean Chizuru and me food. They were also kind enough to bring me clothes after one day that constituted at much more than just a light over coat (I learned it was called a haori). It was in various layers and I guess meant to help me keep warm, especially since the winter seemed to be getting harsher every day. Although they still seemed oblivious to the fact that Chizuru was a girl, she was the one to help me with all the

layers but the first.

I'd lost track of how long they'd kept us in that room together, but something strange had been happening in those few days. Every few sentences that Chizuru spoke to me, I seemed to pick up a word and add it somewhere in the back of my mind, as if I were suddenly understanding what she was saying. I was amazed to say the least, but annoyed just as much. Things like this just don't happen to people in real life. I'd already established this wasn't a dream through all but one method I could think of. And this learning the language just by speaking it and having someone talk to you was bogus.

Chizuru was becoming desperate by the time I could grasp the main ideas of her sentences. "We need to leave," she would say as slow as possible so I could soak up all the words. I remembered this from the game as being the first choice a player would make. "Explain?" I offered, but she shook her head and got up to leave. Just as she was reaching for the door, Kondou Isami slid it open. Shock covered his face momentarily. "I assume you were trying to escape," Keisuke Sannan spoke from the hallway, "How bold. But, running will only make your situation more difficult than it already is." I sighed, I knew they had been watching us the entire time. The only reason they'd open the door besides a meal was if we'd tried to leave. Of course I knew that, but I guess that's why I didn't try harder to stop her. Hijikata appeared as well, issuing a death threat to the both of us even though I'd been rooted to the same spot for days. Okita Souji followed with an empty death threat of his own, "I'm sorry you broke your promise, so now we have to kill both of you." Chizuru seemed to fall for it though and I sighed inwardly. "Chizuru, explain."

I grabbed the attention of the entire room, who'd once believed me to not know a lick of Japanese. We were brought to the common area. Chizuru explained the situation, of her coming to Kyoto to find her father, and then of her meeting me in the alley, and then the Shinsengumi. "I just found her there, unconscious and unclothed. I covered her in my haori and right after that is whenâ€¦" The whole group nodded in understanding then turned to me, I suppose for the rest of the story. My Japanese was still broken pretty bad, but I explained the best I could, "Woke up, alley, forget all, know English, no Japanese, no memory." I couldn't exactly tell them I came from another dimension or time and the reason my hair had been wet and I wasn't clothed because I was trying toâ€¦ I brought the sleeves of the innermost layer of my clothing down over my arms and covered my eyes with my hair. I felt Inoue's hands on my shoulders as the others must have been looking on with sympathy. "Even so," Okita spoke, "It's not like we could house two women in the Shinsengumi compound."

"Two women?!" Kondou broke out of the sober mood that had fallen over the group. "I was sure everyone else had figured it out by now." Chizuru was then compelled to re-explain everything again, being stopped when she confirmed her father was Kodo Yukimura, the doctor specializing in western medicine. The building he had been practicing in had been burnt to the ground, but the good doctor was still missing. Suspicion was that he was forcibly working for an enemy group of the Shinsengumi and they were still actively looking for the man. "But with you," Sannan offered, "We have a better chance of finding him. I myself have only seen him a few times. Surely you would recognize him no matter how disguised me may be."

"Well, if she is his daughter we can't really kill her, can we?" Hijikata turned towards me, "But the other girl is a different story." My eyebrows furrowed together. If they thought I was a threat, then he wouldn't hesitate to kill me. And truly, I was even though they couldn't possibly comprehend the reasons why. I felt like a Mary Sue, sitting there while they contemplated my fate. I knew everything, thrust into an anime like some self-inserted-original-character in a poorly written story by a twelve year old. This is definitely not what I had in mind for an afterlife. I met Hijikata's gaze, "If threat, kill." Surely even broken, it must have reached their ears as their expressions turned to mirror my own. All except Okita, who stood up with his hand on the hilt of his long sword. "If she has a death wish, I don't see why we can't fulfill it!"

"Okita!" Kondou stood up as well, "She's just a girl!" The tension in the air grew with each passing second. Eventually, Kondou ordered Inoue to bring Chizuru and me to our rooms while I assumed they continued to discuss my fate in the common area.

"Why did you ask for them to kill you like that?" Chizuru moved to sit in front of me with her legs tucked under herself. Her arms were unbound, but they had tied me up the same way as before and left me on the futon. "No reason to live."

That night after Chizuru had fallen asleep, I lay there listening to crickets and watching the moon pass by the small, round window. It must have been cold outside, and even colder inside when the door slid open. A shadow passed through and over me, but no footsteps followed. The figure knelt down and began to untie my leg restraints. "I guess they decided, huh?" The hands stopped for a second, and then started again after a hum. He pulled me to sit up, and then we walked together, side-by-side, to the courtyard where he drew his sword. "I apologize," He spoke under his breath. I nodded in understanding while his hand on my shoulder guided me into a kneeling position. His last words to me were cryptic as I gazed up at him through the dim moonlight, "I want this to end, now." His blade was the last thing I saw.

3. YOU! Can't Be Serious

CHAPTER TWO

Chizuru nudged my shoulder with her hand with an urgency that made me gasp as I grasped for my neck, coughing violently as I remembered being sliced open with the sharp of a skilled blade. One swoop of the metal and I could still feel the space in between my neck and head. Chizuru patted my back comfortingly as I declined a tray of breakfast, afraid it would never reach my stomach.

FEBRUARY 1864

I had thought a lot about that night, and the dream I'd had. No doubt, I'd been killed by a member of the Shinsengumi but I could only remember the blood from my neck and head meeting the ground in those last two seconds of consciousness. Since then, I'd had various nightmares about Okita Souji chasing me with his blade and torturing me until I could no longer cry out for Chizuru's help. I'd been avoiding him constantly, eating meals in my room with Chizuru and

never even glancing at the door. Even after we had been told that roaming around the compound was fine, I'd spent a whole week within the same four walls and ironically enough, fearing for my life.

Chizuru slid the door open and we both adjusted the layers of our clothing appropriately. They'd given us both Hakama and told us to keep to ourselves and the captains, not to mingle with the rank-and-file soldiers and act as men. To be honest, I'd skipped out on wearing the hakama and stayed in my kimono. It wasn't as though anyone would see me anyway and no one ever said anything. I didn't mind too much to not be in contact with any of them, but Chizuru seemed affected pretty deeply. Apparently, she'd met some of the soldiers by chance and they'd completely ignored her. To them, it seemed as though she had her own room since they had no knowledge of my existence yet. Even then, many of the rooms were stuffed with four or five men each. Having your own room was a luxury known only to captains, not to their page boys. I suppose she felt lonely because of it, but there was little either of us could do about the situation. "I kind of want to leave right now, but I'm not sure that's such a good idea with Hijikata-san right hereâ€|"

I sighed and resigned myself to trying to cheer the girl up, "If he really isn't here, then I suppose it would be the better time to go. The others are much more lenient."

"I knowâ€| But still, I don't want to go alone. You should come with me!"

I thought for a second. It seemed like it was around this time that they were all normally eating, so they would all be in the common area around the middle of the compound. If this were true, then we had at least twenty minutes to wander around without being interrupted. "Wellâ€| I would like to see the inner courtyard once."

Even though it was a place that haunted my nightmares, I still remember it as being a nice place. It was more the person who followed in my mind. Chizuru jumped a bit and dragged me to my feet. I pulled up the front of my kimono a bit so I wouldn't slide over it. I stood in front of her and looked around, scanning for any stray soldiers or captains late to their meal. "I think it's clear." I stepped out and into the courtyard with small, close footfalls. "Good morning Okita! Good morning, Saito!"

I cringed inwardly and stopped while Chizuru walked over to the pair. Frozen with fear, my eyes switched back and forth from Okita's face to the hibernating Sakura tree. I assumed she was asking them to go and look for her father. I knew the conversation nearly by heart even a week after last playing it since it was always so early in the game. Guess it paid to want a completed game. "Hey, you," Okita shouted over to me, "You're gonna wanna see this!" I complied, but walked on the other side of two and sat on a bench. He looked a bit miffed for a split second, but offered an ironically flirtatious smirk in my direction. Chizuru drew her blade, and anyone could see the tip of it shaking. "I-I don't want to hurt you! If I caught you with my blade you could die!"

Okita replied with an uncontrolled laughter that shook the birds from the trees and started my heart to racing. Surely at any moment, he

would unsheathe his sword and kill me. I didn't notice Saito's glance in my direction as I wrapped my arms around myself and shivered. "You think you could seriously kill Saito?"

"Wellâ€¦"

"If you can prove you can actually use your sword, we might take you on our rounds."

Saito sighed and laid a hand on his right hip, above his swords, "If you are so concerned, use the back of your blade."

Chizuru considered it for a moment and nodded, making clear contact with Saito's eyes, "Okay, let's do it!" Saito responded with what could only be a small laugh, and stayed in the same position. Chizuru seemed puzzled, but stepped forward and made to attack. In one faultless movement, Saito's sword was out and not an inch away from Chizuru's neck. "Your master should be proud," he said before sheathing his weapon, "Your blade was not clouded. You can see into the heart of a swordsman. You were blessed with a good teacher."

I couldn't help but feel slightly anxious, watching them. Saito picked up Chizuru's blade and studied it, making a comment on its age that unconsciously chose to ignore, along with the rest of their conversation. "You seem to fear Souji. I jumped to my feet and turned to my right, where Saito stood with a nearly blank expression on his face. I didn't say anything in response, of course. The captains of the Shinsengumi were the only ones who knew of my existence in the compound, but only Chizuru had ever spoken to me directly. I suppose they thought she was teaching me how to speak Japanese. In a way, it was true. In all others, not so much. My eyes moved over to Okita, who flashed me a grin. I shuddered inwardly and it did not go unnoticed by the other captain. "Iai, right?"

He seemed to have half expected me to ask about his unusual sword technique, maybe surprised that I knew what it was called. "Yes," he answered, "Draw the sword and strike the enemy at once. Why are you afraid of Okita?"

"I had a dream, the first night I came here," It seemed strange to tell him about it. Part of me was embarrassed that the only thing keeping me from being okay around a person was a dream. "He came into my room and unbound me, then took me to the courtyard andâ€¦ beheaded me. Ever since that dream, I've had nightmares every night. It's why I never come out of my room. I'm afraid to be around him, or caught alone."

If Saito had any emotional reaction to what I was telling him, his facial expression didn't betray any of it. I felt awkward as we stood there under the tree, but I didn't have anything more to say about it. "It wouldn't do well to have a woman incapable of defending herself staying in the compound. More often than not, it isn't safe. If you would like, I could teach you some of the art of self-defense."

I looked up at him with wide eyes, "Really? You would do that for me?"

He nodded and then drifted back to Okita and Chizuru.

I spent the next couple of days in my room with Chizuru, continuing on as though I had never left. And although it was strange, I found myself talking more candidly to my roommate about more than just solitude and worrying about her father. "They all seem pretty young to be running a police force all on their own don't they? How old do you think they are?"

I paused in between sips of tea and glanced over at her, mischief in my eyes. Of course, I knew how old they were at this point. I was a fan-girl of them all before a week ago, even Okita was one of my favorites behind, well- I smiled a bit at the memory and took another sip. "The captains all seem to be in their early twenties, except Toudou-san. He's more around your age."

She seemed to think on it for a second and nodded, "I guess you're right, then. How old are you?"

My smile faded a bit and I sat my cup down heavily. Even after a week of staying here, I hadn't told any of them so much as a name. For some reason, I was afraid of saying anything about it. Chizuru waved her hands around apologetically with an awkward giggle, "I mean, you don't have to say anything! I didn't mean to offend you, I'm so sorry!"

I shook my head, "No it's all right, just an age. I'm nineteen this year, eighteen right now."

She paused in her apologies and set her hands down in her lap, like I'd given her the secret to eternal life and she was thinking about whether she was going to use it or sell it to the government as a top secret medical treatment. "But anyway, I don't think age has anything to do with potential. You're sixteen and left home to look for your father, and now you're roughing it with a bunch of murderous men." I thought of Okita in particular.

"I guess you're rightâ€¦ But they seem nice enough, deep down."

"Has anyone ever told you how gullible you were?"

A shocked gasp escaped my mouth as I moved away from the voice, knocking my hot tea over my eyes. I held them both close to my hands as I stared wildly at OkitaSouji who had somehow managed to make it into our room undetected. He moved over to me with what could have been concern. "Stay away from me!" I shouted as loud as I possibly could, standing up and running to the door and then to the hallway where I smashed straight into another form, hard and covered in fabric. Their hands held my shoulders as I struggled to get away, still in shock from my burnt hands. "Calm down," Saito spoke firmly and my eyes widened up at him, tears falling out without restraint, "It's okay."

After a couple minutes of him allowing me to calm down on the side of the walkway, he led me into the courtyard and to the well in the center. He brought a bucket of water up and gingerly took my hands in his, placing them in the bucket. I was too shocked at the gesture to focus on the renewed pain, staring up at his face while he focused on holding my hands in the water. "Is there an insect on my face?"

I blushed and looked at my hands again, "No."

He sighed at my lack of conversation skills and pulled my hands out to inspect them, "They are not badly burnt but if they begin to blister, please go to Inoue-san for bandages and ointment. Be careful until they are fully healed."

I felt like the moment should have been captured in one of those CG images that are supposed to highlight those special, doki-doki moment between two characters. Chizuru came into the courtyard with Toudou and Okita trailing behind them. "Are you okay?" Chizuru sounded concerned but I only nodded, glancing in between Saito and Okita without fail. Okita muttered an apology for scaring me, but I only nodded again. An uncomfortable silence wrapped around the four of us. Toudou, not really getting the idea of silence, was the first to speak up. "Do you want to go eat with us?" I held my eyes on Saito's white scarf for a moment then looked at him, "Not allowed, Toudou-san."

He sighed exasperatedly and Chizuru laughed, "Well, Hijikata isn't here or anything, so it's totally fine. Oh, and alsoâ€¦ I know you don't want us to know your name or anything, but I'd feel a lot better if you just dropped the formalities and called me Heisuke like everyone else." I knew he wouldn't be up for debate, so I nodded once more. Souji caught my eye, a deep frown over his face, as everyone else started walking. "Look, I'm really sorry about your hands." He scratched the back of his neck absentmindedly, "I didn't mean to scare you so much. If it'll make you feel more comfy around me, I don't mind you callin' me Souji-kun!" A grin spread over his face as I nearly fell over. Never in a million years would I ever call my murderer in such a familiar way. Without acknowledging him any further, I ran to catch up with Saito, staying close to my savior for the day. I didn't look back to see Okita trailing behind us.

After Harada and Nagakura called us out on being late to dinner, we all settled down to eat. Although conversation was lively and even Chizuru was enjoying herself for once, I ate in silence in between Chizuru and Harada, very much aware of Okita staring at me from across the room. "You know," Harada spoke loud enough to catch the ear of everyone in the room, "We still don't know your name." Clumsy me. So shocked at being addressed, I spilled my tea again, just a couple of drops reaching my hands. Saito was in front of me as soon as he saw me set my cup down. "I thought I told you to be more careful."

I blushed and tucked my hands into my kimono sleeves, where I still refused to wear hakama. "Fine." Nagakura quickly offered to grab bandages and some ointment. It made me a little angry for some reason that he could still see how much pain I was in, but I thanked him when he came back and made quick work of bandaging my hands while the others continued to eat in silence. When everyone was back in their seats and the air a bit more clear, I answered Harada's question, "It's Kurosawa Kagami."

I'd thought the entire week about what I would have them call me. Finally I'd settled on something a couple days ago that seemed to match my situation. Kagami meant "mirror", and was chosen as a reference to Through the Looking Glass, where the main character travelled to Underland through a mirror. I very much sympathized with her situation so it seemed fitting. Kurosawa meant "black swamp" as far as I could tell, and really I just thought it sounded nice with the given name. "It suits you," Okita smirked behind a saucer of

sake, "If I were you, I'd-"

"Okita," Saito cut him off, "Not the time."

I tucked my bandaged hands into my sleeves and studied the patterns on my haori while the conversation resumed with the tone I had started with. It made me feel like I was destined to ruin any sort of social gathering. Chizuru was better at these things. "There's no use in looking so down," I looked over at Harada who wore a small smile on his face, "I could have guessed being so forward would have shaken you, but I promise we aren't gonna hurt you, or Chizuru. Not even Okita."

I glanced over at the aforementioned samurai, nose stuffed in a bowl of rice. His face was curled into a frown again and he seemed to be pouting even though everyone else was lively. We locked eyes for a second before I turned back to Harada. "I was talking to him earlier todayâ€¦ He's worried that you hate him or something, but you're more afraid, right? Souji talks a lot, but he wouldn't hurt a woman without reason."

So he'd been talking about me? Of course I feared for my life whenever he was around, so it was hard not to notice. But to think that it may have actually bothered him in a way that didn't make him want to seriously injure me was a far-cry from the maniacally laughing, blood-thirsty demon that haunted my nightmares.

Inoue came in, interrupting the multiple conversations and laughter. His face was solemn and I immediately realized what he was going to say. My eyes were downcast as he spoke. "I've received word from Osaka. Sannan was injured in battle." Chizuru was glad to hear he would live, until it was explained that he would likely never wield a sword again. I looked at Saito as he explained, while the last of Chizuru's relief slowly seeped from her eyes to match those of everyone else in the room. "If push comes to shove, he'll have to take it. Sannan isn't going to just give up." Nagakura sighed at Okita who had spoken out of nowhere, "Don't jinx him, it'll look bad for the rest of us if officers start joining the Corps."

Chizuru spoke up, "What do you mean? Aren't the Corps the Shinsengumi?" Heisuke started to explain, before Harada cut him off with a fist to the face. The girl looked shocked but I kept my head down. Of course I knew they were talking about the Ochimizu, the Water of Life that gave humans the strength of demons. My fan-girl-Mary-Sue situation had allowed me that much insight. I popped back into listening in when Okita tried to get Chizuru to understand why she couldn't know much more. "The Corps are a group of men to be pitied," he sighed but no emotion fell through.

I thought about the anime and the Otome games I had played that had given me the knowledge that I had now, thinking to the not so distant future when many of these men and maybe all of them would succumb to the Ochimizu. We finished dinner in silence and then Chizuru and I were trusted to make it back to our room without the assistance of any of the Shinsengumi. I'd asked if we could have tea brought to our room, but I retracted my request when Saito sent me a look that could have killed a thousand Imperial armies. Chizuru had been deep in thought since we'd gotten back. I knew what she was thinking about as always, so I didn't bother trying to distract her from her thoughts. She would do that on her own.

A whole other week later was when Saito finally came to my room and offered to give me sword lessons. Part of me was pretty eager to begin learning, so I succumbed to the pressure of wearing hakama and let my kimono in my room to meet Saito in the dojo. A couple of the captains and the men were there, training together. I waved slightly to them, and all but Okita waved back. Slightly crestfallen in spite of myself, I grabbed a wooden practice sword from Saito. "Take a defensive stance."

I blinked from the abruptness of his voice and grounded myself, sword out away from me with my arms slightly bent. As Saito moved around me, he fixed little things here and there with my stance. "Keep your sword closer to yourself, or you leave your torso open to your enemy's blade. Keep your knees apart, but not so far." All these little things I tried to correct as his voice guided. "Good."

I felt a small smile pull up at the very corner of my mouth.

4. IT! Keeps Happening

CHAPTER THREE

JULY 1864

The months with the Shinsengumi had passed easily, and all too soon. Saito continued to train me in swordsmanship, and I'd even dueled Chizuru. Although she won every time, Saito said I was improving so I decided to keep up with it. Most of the other members had also become friendlier to their new guests, and Chizuru and I had continued to join them in dinner. The only stipulation was that I hold a towel around my tea cup at all times. I'd also become more warmed up to the idea of being around Okita without fearing for my life anymore. It seemed silly to be afraid just because of a very realistic dream, and once I'd decided to talk to Okita the dreams had stopped. It was proving difficult to reach him, though. He seemed to be out on patrol or busy or missing at all hours of the day. Truth be told, it was kind of bringing me down.

Chizuru and I were called into Hijikata's office one day. I was relieved to say the least when Okita and Heisuke were there as well. Hijikata wasn't the most personable of the Shinsengumi. "You can leave the compound." My eyes widened to the size of dinner plates even though I knew what he was going to say before he said it. He meant me as well, even though I could barely wield a sword. "Hijikata-san," I cut Chizuru off from her questioning and pointed to myself, "Not a good idea!" A smirk tugged at his face, "I asked Saito about your capabilities with a blade, he had nothing but good to say." It seemed as though my argument ended with that. "Souji, Heisuke, you're on patrol today, correct?"

They both nodded in response. "I think it's Souji's turn though, right?" My heart leapt. I wasn't thinking about leaving for obvious reasons, but if I were able to talk to him and convey how sorry I was for treating him life shit for nearly half a year, then maybe we could be okay. A smirk crossed his face as he only addressed Chizuru, "Remember, don't run or I'll kill you. And if something happens out there, you'd better be able to hold your own." He didn't seem to be serious, but it still sent shivers running up and down my spine.

Maybe today was too early for this. "At any rate," Hijikata glanced over at Okita, "You both have my permission to go."

At that point there was no doubt in my mind that I wasn't ready to confront Okita, so I folded my hands into the sleeves of my kimono and spoke, "Decline."

In the end, Chizuru decided not to stay either, for fear of burdening Okita or the others any further. "I think they've finally started to trust us, Kagami-chan." I smiled a bit at the pet name, concealing my disappointment. "If Hijikata is willing to let us go on patrol, I would say so." We sat in pleasant silence for a bit after we'd finished talking. It was hot in the compound and even in the summer clothing that Saito had brought me a couple months ago, I was sweating. "Chizuru, do you want to go to the courtyard?" She nodded hastily and led the way as if she'd been hoping I would ask. Unfortunately there was no wind blowing, so it was hot even in the shade of the trees. "I've been thinking of my father a lot more lately," Chizuru made herself more comfortable at the base of one of the trees, "I've been wondering about why he was helping the Shinsengumi, but--"

"But what?" I glanced over at Sanan, who stood next to the tree that Chizuru was leaning against. She expressed her worry about his health, but Sanan dismissed it almost like an insult. I felt bad for the man, but that didn't suddenly give him valid reason to respond so horribly to Chizuru's genuine concerns. I fronted the retreat back to our bedroom, as Chizuru wasn't too far behind.

Later that night, the compound seemed to be buzzing with activity. I knew what tonight would be, so I didn't bother listening in when Chizuru stopped Heisuke for more information. We waited in our room while every left for their posts. Sannan called us both into the common room, explaining that it was to keep a closer eye on us while everyone else was out. The door slid open to reveal a young man dressed in black, reminding me more of a ninja than a samurai or ally of the Shinsengumi. "They're meeting at Ikeda." This of course did not bode well for our side, since most of the men were at Shikoku. "Yamazaki," Sannan addressed the other man in black directly, "I need you to inform the others at Ikeda Inn, and please take these children with you." I was too shocked at him requesting I go as well to be miffed about being called a child by a man who was only a couple years older than I was. "There may be rounin to intercept you." "I understand," Yamazaki replied, "If we're held up, I can trust at least one of these two to deliver the message." One of the two? Even so, we'd both agreed to go with him. I placed my hand on the kodachi Saito had let me use, momentarily drawing Sannan's attention. It seemed that he wanted to say something about it, but held his comments in favor of allowing us to leave. We ran out of the compound, and only then did it truly hit me how long I'd been there. Staying in the same room with very little exercise certainly didn't help with stamina. But, I knew I had to keep up with Yamazaki and Chizuru so I focused all my energy into my footfalls.

After a few blocks, we clashed with some rounin at an intersection. Yamazaki called us to move on ahead, so we wasted no time with stopping. We had to though, when the sharp end of a blade nearly took off both our heads. It was Hijikata, "What are you two doing here?!" "They're meeting at Ikedaya!" We said at the same time, kneeling over each other to catch our breaths. Hijikata's face grew even sterner if

possible. "Are you sure?" I looked over to Saito and nodded with as much gusto as I could manage. Chizuru filled them in on the rest, having an easier time calming her lungs. "Saito, Harada," Hijikata addressed the two, "Take the men to Ikeda, I have something else to handle right now." They both nodded and Harada turned to address the rest of the soldiers. "I can't allow you to be alone while Kyoto is so dangerous. Stay with Harada and I or go with Hijikata."

Chizuru had chosen to go with Hijikata, and I had no qualms about staying with Saito so we parted ways for the first time since we met. It was odd not having her at my side, but I wished her the best of luck before I ran off by Saito's side. Nearly a block away, you could hear the screams. When Harada and Saito separated to take on different parts of the building, I'd decided to follow Saito to the front of the building. With what must have been the first complete sentence I had spoken in Japanese to anyone but Chizuru, "I'm going in with you, Saito-san." He spared me a glance, "Stay behind me and try not to become too much of a burden." I cringed at his words, but softened a bit when his gaze fell on his kodachi that rested on my right hip. It was hard to be a right-handed swordsman when your sensei was left-handed. With just a few words, he guided his men into the inn. The smell of blood was strong and I could barely see the bodies of dead Choshu littering the floor from behind Saito's blue haori. Kondo greeted us with a grin that should have split his face wide open. Nagakura came over with the same expression plastered on his face, "Sorry Saito, looks like I didn't leave any for ya!" Even in a situation like this, they could still joke around a bit. "I'll let it slide this time," was Saito's only response.

In a swift change in emotion Saito began ordering his men again, "Don't allow any to escape; kill all who resist!" I blinked at him and then sighed. Of course he'd been worried about so few men being there in the beginning but they seemed to have held their own exceptâ€¦ "Okita!" Without even thinking, I ran up the steps across from the door. Saito called after me, followed by the sound of shredding flash. I couldn't turn back to look though, because I knew exactly where I was headed. I ran upstairs, to one of the rooms where I could see Okita laying there, a man standing over him. Okita called something out to him before jumping out the window. I ran over to him, where he was coughing violently. Was it really starting this soon? "Okita-san?" I turned him over as gently as I could and placed his head in my lap when he'd finally calmed down. "Kurosawa-san-

I shook my head, tears prickling my eyes with dread for the near future. "You should call me Kagami-chan, if it would make you more comfortable around me."

The sun came up much later after I found Okita. Even though the raid had lasted nearly two hours, it felt like longer. For me, the last of it was spent worrying about Okita's condition and helping Chizuru treat the injured. We'd won, but Okita and Souji as well as Nagakura and two others had been injured. One of the rank-and-files had lost his life. Even so, the Shinsengumi had finally made a name for themselves in the capital and that was a victory that could not be over shadowed.

AUGUST 1864

Since the Ikedaya incident, Chizuru was spending more time on patrol with the others. She'd asked me every time to go out with her, but

I'd always declined. "Well, at least go into the courtyard for some fresh air while I'm out!" As a doctor's daughter, it must be difficult for her to ignore the health of others. For the most part I did spend more time in hakama, sitting outside on the edge of the walkway. Since it was fall now, many of the rank-and-file soldiers trained on their own or in pairs when the weather was especially nice. Even though my sensei didn't permit me to practice with them, I somehow felt like I could learn something by watching them. Saito also told me to not call him that, but he was my teacher so I felt it appropriate in that aspect. He'd made me capable of holding my own against maybe a ten year old on a bad day, but I couldn't complain. At least I was going somewhere. "Kagami-chan!"

I looked over at Okita, who was walking beside Saito. I waved over, choosing to ignore Saito's irked expression. Apparently, it wasn't considered very appropriate to call a woman by her first name and that specific suffix in Japan. We didn't have honorifics back home, so I didn't really understand and part of me didn't care too much for the boundaries. They didn't seem to be so strict around Chizuru, but I guess the three year difference somehow made it more important. "Saito-san, Okita-kun!" I offered a small smile.

"Saito-kun said you were getting better with your sword, mind if I test it?" Okita sword made a click as his thumb pushed it from its sheath. His voice was playful, but his eyes were dangerous. "She's not quite that skilled, Okita."

I sighed and thanked Saito under my breath, always saving me from Okita in any situation. As they bickered over my skills with a sword, I began thinking. I'd been with them for half a year wandering around the compound and never going outside of these walls but once for Ikedaya. At that time, Chizuru and I were instrumental in the Shinsengumi's success. But now, a useless feeling seemed to linger in the back of mind no matter how comforting everyone was. I had no real skills. Japanese food was completely foreign to me before now. I couldn't go on patrols because I would be useless there, too. They only said Chizuru could go because of her father, but if a fight with rounin were to break out there's no chance she would be able to hold her own. I could clean, but everyone did that constantly so it didn't make me particularly useful. I could sew, but not well enough to regularly take apart and clean their haori like most people did with formal wear. Saito was put out the most of them all, spending hours every week just training a woman how to wield a sword long enough to run away. Utterly hopeless! "Kurosawa-san."

I brought my head up from drooping into my knees and turned to look at Saito, "Yeah!" Okita rolled his eyes and threw his hands up in the air before walking off and muttering to himself, "So she answers to him!"

"You seemed to be in your own mind," Saito explained, "Okita-kun had been talking to you."

I blushed and fiddled with the open sides of my hakama. They were almost like pockets, except they weren't closed like pockets. More like bottomless pockets. "If you ever need someone to talk to, you can come to me. I understand that it must be difficult to live with so many men, and Chizuru is not the best at understanding certain things. So please, come to me."

An inaudible gasp escaped my mouth. I could not remember Saito being so forward with Chizuru so early in the game. At this point, I would normally check my meters to see exactly how high his romance level was. So uncharacteristically high for so early. "Um," I avoided looking at him because I could feel my face turn beet red, "Thank you, Saito-san."

A few days later, Chizuru and I were delivering tea to the captains in the common room. It has taken us longer to make it because I wanted to help, but she had tried to teach me along the way since I'd never made traditional tea before. "Thanks Chizuru-chan, Kurosawa-san," Nagakura said as he took his tea, "I feel like you guys are our servants or something."

"Thank you, Yukimura-kun, Kurosawa-san," Inoue had an apologetic face, "I feel bad asking you to do all these thingsâ€¦ You're our guests."

Chizuru replied cheerfully, "It's nothing, really! Besides, you're giving me a place to stay."

Neither of us voiced our obvious desire to be more useful around the compound. Chizuru headed the battle since she already knew how a Japanese household worked. I was still learning everything. All thoughts and conversations were ended abruptly when Kondou slid the door open as fast as possible and announced with the widest grin, "The Shinsengumi has received orders from the Aizu Domain! All available units should prepare to leave immediately! It seems we've finally been noticed."

I smile softly with the others who were cheering loudly. Perhaps this was a chance to finally be handy to the Shinsengumi. Hijikata broke up the celebration as quickly as it had started, and all the captains flurried out to gather their men. "Okita and Toudou," Sannan called out from the commotion, "I doubt you want to hear this, but I think it best if you were to remain at the compound. Your injuries keep you from combat, mine included."

"Hey, I'm perfectly fine," Okita argued, "I mean, I'm not one-hundred percent, but I'm not bleeding or anything."

They continued to argue while Chizuru and I sat in our same places as before everyone started running around. This happened more often than naught when Okita in particular believed himself to be completely healthy. Of course he wasn't so bad off, yet. "Oh yeah," Nagakura addressed Chizuru, "Didn't you say you'd like to tag along if we got orders? You still up for that?"

"I don't see any reason why she couldn't," Kondou backed him up, "And Kagami as well. Saito tells me you've been practicing with a kodachi?"

I placed my right hand over the hilt of Saito's sword, suddenly conscious about having it in my possession Ever since he'd first given it to me, I'd kept it always in arm's reach. But even if I'd been practicing for nearly the entire time I'd been with them could I really hold my own? "If you come, you will surely be a burden," Sannan cut in, "War is not for careless children."

"Sannan-san, so you mean they can accompany us as long as they are

not a burden?" Saito responded quickly, "I've taught Kurosawa-san from the beginning of her stay with the Shinsengumi. Do you not trust my swordsmanship?"

He was curt, but his words surprised everyone in the room. Did he really have so much faith in me? Saito's argument left no room for further discussion, unless Sannan really wanted to attack Saito personally. "Excellent!" Kondou's excitement couldn't be hammered down, "I'll take full responsibility of the two of you, if you want to participate."

In the end, we both decided to go with them. Maybe for similar reasons, maybe not. In any case, I was glad to have already been wearing my hakama because we were out of the compound minutes after the decision was made. We marched together through Kyoto to the magistrate's office. A number of other soldiers were there and still preparing to leave for battle. Kondou headed us all, and approached the gate, informing them of who we were and why we had come. "You were told to come here," the man replied with a confused expression on his face, "We never received word of this."

Chizuru gasped from beside me, probably wondering why they hadn't even heard of our involvement in the war. Saito knelt down a few inches to whisper something in her ear, an explanation of how we could have gone unnoticed. Even though I knew it was just that, a tinge of jealousy rose up from my stomach as I watched from the corner of my eye. I pushed it back down as much as possible and tried to focus on Kondou again. "Even so," Kondou continued, "Our presence has been requested. If I could speak to--"

"It doesn't matter. We don't need the Wolves of Mibu for this!"

My mouth curved back into a snarl as I felt like tearing that man to shreds like the wolves he called the men who made the Shinsengumi my home. I kept my eyes downward and mentally tore myself apart from the group, ignoring a spared glance from Saito before we left to look for another group of allies who hopefully acted like it. We walked until it was nearly completely dark outside, reaching Kujo Beach after an unnecessary visit to a higher-up that I decided I didn't much care for. At that point, I was angry with the magistrate's office for their insults, the Shinsengumi for taking it, and running for hours on end to a destination that would probably end up in us having to go somewhere else. Even at Kujo, we were met with opposition. "What the hell?" Thankfully, Nagakura had the balls to speak up where I couldn't, "We were told to come here but your superiors, goddamnit! You wanna fuck us over, go ahead. But you'll be disobeying a direct order! Is that really something you wanna do?!"

The Aizu soldier moved his mouth like a fish gasping for water, and I gave Nagakura a mental clap. Even though it was technically talking out of turn and frowned upon, Kondou couldn't hide his grin. "I'd like to speak with your commanding officer. Could you take me to him?"

After a bit more effort from Kondou, the Aizu troops had decided to let us stay with them. Unfortunately, they were all reserves, stationed there just in case the unrest spread. The main army was stationed at Hamaguri Gate. Chizuru seemed shocked, and I maintained an outer exterior of quiet indifference. My insides boiled, one thing after another, always. "Why would they send us out here acting like

it's an emergency or some shit?" Nagakura, always the first to speak his mind.

"We can't predict what will happen. There is little we can do until we are called upon." Saito, always level-headed.

The captains, Chizuru and I, and a couple of the regular troops sat around a fire later that night, trying to stay awake. Since they were holding onto the possibility of being called during the night, they'd all decided it would be best. I thought of Okita and how much we needed his humor right about now. Each captain had a different personality that fit into this puzzle, helping it become a whole. In the game and anime, they all talked about how important Kondou was, and then Hijikata once he became captain. Even though I agreed with them to a certain extent, the Shinsengumi began to fall apart the moment Sannan lost use of his arm. It wouldn't be too long now before he succumbed to the Ochimizu and then depending on which path Chizuru chose in addition to my own miniscule changes... "Kurosawa-san," Saito laid a hand on my head, "You're trapped in your own mind."

I turned to look at him and smiled sadly, envisioning his Rasetsu form, "I have a lot on my mind."

It was as if we'd created our own little corner, "What are you thinking about?"

"I didn't know you were so forward, Saito-san."

My tone had been a bit easing, I suppose. He swiftly removed his hand and looked away. Parts of me kept forgetting how shy he actually was around women. It was easy when he acted so indifferent all the time. "I was thinking about Okita-san." I wish I could have withdrawn my words as soon as I'd spoken them. "You two seem to have gotten closer." It was a fair observation, but not really something I'd wanted Saito to make. I stayed silent, not knowing if there was any more I could say. Maybe it was a bit conceited of me to have wished it was jealousy and not fact that had caused him to say that.

I'd fallen asleep with my head on my knees, wishing that my hopes weren't so easily raised.

5. BREAK! Rot Away

CHAPTER FOUR

The sound of gunshot rippled through the air, sending the Shinsengumi into a frenzy. I stood up immediately, wobbling at bit the blood pressure change before steadying myself. "It's time we left." The other captains nodded in agreement and began barking orders at their separate units. "Stop!" An Aizu soldier ran over to us, "What are you doing? We were ordered to stay here!"

"I'm sorry," The anger evident behind Hijikata's apology, "I assumed you were here for a reason, would you rather sit around and wait? We're here to help if those Choshu assholes attack! What's happening right now?! If you have any ounce of pride left in you, you'll screw your goddamn orders and move!"

We all ran after him in formation. I didn't look back to see if the

Aizu soldiers were following our example, only avoided running alongside Chizuru and Saito. It was a short run for the Shinsengumi, who made it to the gate in not time. Although a battle had been expected with guns and swords and cannons, there was nothing left. Dead Aizu littered the ground, a couple with their own swords run through their backs, some without. The battle had ended long before anyone had arrived. As morbid as it was, the only think I could think about was how we were going to bury so many men. "Kurosawa-san," Harada walked in front of me, seemingly after giving orders to his unit, "Are you okay?"

I realized I had started to cry, and used my sleeve to wipe my eyes but they just kept coming. Harada led me away from the scene and behind a large tree where he wrapped his arms tight around me and allowed me to cry. I'd only seen death so personally twice in my life and even then it was only one person at a time, not an entire army of men. "Better now?" I nodded and pulled away. "It must be rough as a woman to see war all of a sudden," He scratched the back of his head, "If you ever need to talk about it, just come to me, okay?"

I widened my eyes; Saito had said the same a few days ago. If I was ever going to continue with them and be helpful, I needed to toughen up significantly. Nothing like this had ever happened back home, but this wasn't home anymore. When Harada and I reappeared into the group, Saito had returned from gathering information about what had happened. He glanced in my direction before turning to Kondou as I felt a sense of dÃ©jÃ vu. "The Choshu attacked early this morning, but were fended off by Aizu and Satsuma forces."

Hijikata grinned, "Satsuma and Aizu working together; Times sure are changing."

It was a little shocking, considering the two clans had been rivals or whatever for generations. Then again, clans tended to fight each other anyways so no part of it was really shocking. There were still Choshu at Hage Gate. Yamazaki returned with more news, "Commander, we believe the men who led this raid are going to Mount Ten'nou."

It didn't take him long to begin giving orders to the captains, "Sanosuke, head to Kuge Gate and deal with the rest of those Choshu bastards. Saito and Yamazaki, stay here to further asses Hamaguri Gate. Be aware that the Choshu could return. Chief, I have a tough one for you. Go talk to the Aizu bigwigs. The Choshu's men are scattered, so it would be best to find a way to deal with the remainders. If we're going to leave Kyoto to go after them, you're the one to get the papers. Gen, go with him and keep a close eye."

Everyone accepted their orders without hesitation, "As for you two," His gaze shifted between Chizuru and I as I moved almost behind Harada. I wasn't sure what he would do with me, but Chizuru would choose to go with Hijikata, that much was obvious. But meâ€ I looked over to Saito who was facing Hijikata, but staring at me from the corner of his eyes. "Neither of you can go with Kondou, but other than that I'll leave it up to you as individuals."

I looked over at Saito once more, then back at Hijikata, "Kuge, then." Harada laid a hand on my head, ruffling my hair a bit and loosening my hair.

The fight at Hamaguri hadn't been quite so easily decided. There were still a number of fights going on with Choshu soldiers who didn't seem ready to lose anytime soon. Harada turned to look at me as his men moved out, "You should stay here, Kurosawa-san," Harada spoke as though I were a child, "It's going to get pretty dangerous." He ran off before I could even respond to him, and it left me feeling a bit of resentment as I watched him from afar. "If you want to go any further, you'll have to get past us first!"

I moved forward more until I was in at least the second row, and pulled my sword out of its sheath, gaining a defensive position like the rest of the men. Harada taunted the Choshu men mercilessly. The two forces converged in battle, I realized I could probably defeat at least one Choshu, if I timed my attacks right. Bringing forth the memories of my training with Saito, I charged a Choshu who had his back turned, and cringed as my sword cut through his flesh and all the way down his back. The noise was slick and made me cringe as he fell. "Kurosawa!"

I turned around just in time to duck and nearly sever the Achilles tendons of the Choshu who'd attempted to kill me. "What are you doing?!" Harada called out to me in between stabs of his spear. "Being useful!" I shouted out angrily in between ducking blows of swords and spears. Honestly, after the first two it was the other Shinsengumi who were onto the Choshu soldiers like the hungry wolves they were known as, Wolves of Mibu. They had the upper hand in no time and the battle ceased, some of the Choshu commanders shouting nonsense at their soldiers. As they began to retreat, the Aizu ran after them. They were stopped by a single man who carried a gun, aiming and getting a perfect shot on the Aizu who'd given the order to follow the Choshu. "Looks like I'll be playing you guys for a while!" The Aizu and even some of the Shinsengumi froze with fear. In the end, guns and pistols were a more efficient weapon in battle. But this time, it may have been the gunman who frightened them the most. Shiranui Kyo had never been one of my favorite Oni. "Well, it's nice of you to play," Harada fronted the group of us, "But don't you think wielding a gun against a group of swordsmen is a little unfair?"

Shiranui feigned boredom but his smirked betrayed his excitement at finding an opponent who didn't fear a gun, "Nah, seems fair to me. Besides, you have that big ole pig-sticker!"

Harada took it as a challenge and came at the man directly, spear pointed towards Shiranui. His movement was quick but Shiranui was able to dodge all too close. They exchanged insults with a surprisingly cordial tone. "I am Shiranui Kyo, Shiranui-san."

"Sanosuke Harada, captain of the Shinsengumi's 10th Division."

The air was tense for a moment at they stood in defensive positions, never breaking eye contact with each other. I felt inadequate just standing there, but I knew I couldn't really get in between a duel. At this point, Chizuru would have chosen to either ask Shiranui to leave or cheer for Harada. The first option worked, but it was embarrassing and more her style. The second—well, that wasn't going to happen. After a few more seconds of waiting, Shiranui lowered his gun, and Harada lowered his spear in response. A sort of mutual agreement seemed to have passed between them. "Well, the

Choshu have escaped, that was my only job here." A grin worked its way back on his face, "But don't think I'll go so easy on you next time."

His face scanned the crowd before I locked eyes with him. Something flashed across his face for a moment, before he raised his gun again quicker than Harada could perceive, and shot multiple times before running off. I fell to the ground beneath me, hearing static underneath all the shouting as I fought to keep my eyes open. "Kurosawa-san!" Harada called from no more than a foot above my face. I moaned loudly, feeling an intense pain flower out to cover my entire body. So, this is what a gunshot felt like. Maybe I would finally get what I wanted this time.

6. Change of Scenery

CHAPTER FIVE

I woke up on my futon, a dull pain continuing across my stomach, but nothing like I thought it was before. It was difficult to move so I just stayed in place, squeezing my fists together, and then apart as a distraction and keeping my eyes shut to avoid the light flooding over me. When I finally opened my eyes I could make out Harada and Chizuru on either side of me, talking to two people standing in the door frame. "Kagami-chan!" Okita would have leaped onto me if I was in better health, but he settled for racing to my bedside, leaving Saito at the door. "What happened? Harada, wasn't I shot by Shiranui-san!? I thought I'd died!"

Harada blinked a few times before sparing glances at the others. I forgot full sentences were supposed to be extremely rare around the captains. "No, you rushed in after me. Took a couple guys down but someone nearly gutted you while you weren't paying attention. After that, I had one of the Aizu take you back to Saito-kun at Hamaguri Gate where Yamazaki looked at your injuries," Harada looked uncomfortable before looking to Saito who seemed extremely exhausted, "By the time that Shiranui guy came around, you were already gone! How did you know about him?"

I was in deep shit this time. There was no way I could take myself out of this one, even Saito who knew I had vivid dreams wouldn't take just my word at this point. But really, what choice was there? Even if I chose to tell them why I knew all these things, they would never believe me. So, I lied. "I must have dreamed it," I began, "Sometimes if people are talking while I'm asleep, I'll dream about the things they talk about."

Harada nodded while stroking his chin in thought, "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. You've been out for a few days so that's plenty of time for your mind to think up all that stuff. Right, Saito-kun?"

Everyone turned to look at the left-handed swordsman who until then seemed entirely distracted from the conversation until then. He looked at me and simply muttered a calm, "It's possible," before walking off. The group seemed to look at each other and let out a collective sigh. "Miss something?" I asked.

"Saito's got a stick up his ass, has ever since we got back," Okita

explained, "Took out his sword against Harada once we all met up again that day. He's been distant ever since, real bummer." My eyebrows furrowed in response, but I couldn't think of why Saito would suddenly lose his cool with Harada- Unless he was worried for my safety. But, that couldn't be. He'd practically ignored me in the days before Hamaguri. "Hey Kagami-chan, don't worry about Saito, you still have me." Okita followed it words with a sly wink and I nodded, smiling a bit. As Chizuru tried to explain to me what had happened with everyone while we were all separated, I drifted off again.

Although Yamazaki had said the wound in my stomach was pretty deep and I would be bed-ridden for another two weeks just to make sure I didn't open up again, I was up helping Chizuru bring the captains their tea just a few short days after I first woke up. After all, stomach wounds could look much worse than they actually were sometimes. That's what Harada would have said, I imagined. "Tea's ready!" I followed Chizuru around the room, helping her pour and distribute the cups. "Thank you again," Inoue said as Chizuru handed him his own, "Although, Kurosawa-san, should you not be resting? I don't believe Yamazaki has examined you since you came back a few days ago." I smiled a bit stiffly in response as I handed Sannan his tea, "I'm fine."

With the last of it handed out, Chizuru and I were invited to stay and eat our own meals with them this morning. Although, neither of us were much conversation with different things on our minds besides breakfast. I held my hands over my stomach, fingers twitching around to find the three bullet holes that were surely still there. Only, the bandages were covering a scar where a random opposing soldier had left his mark. He was most likely dead now. That dream had been so real. But even then, the way Harada had explained the wound made it seem as though he was sure I would die from it. That wasn't something I had completely accepted the way I had made it seem to Inoue or anyone that had asked. Perhaps he was only exaggerating because he was worried, but the only way- "The Yagi have been good to us," Hijikata interrupted my thoughts, "But we need a larger place."

It was true we'd been in the same place for at least the whole year that Chizuru and I had been here, but with the Shinsengumi finally becoming credited by the Shogunate, new recruits were being bunched en masse like packaged meat. More would be coming soon, since Heisuke was out recruiting in Edo. "That's easy enough to say," Okita reminded the commander, "But do you have a place in mind that would actually let us stay?"

"Nishi Hongwanji."

Everyone seemed pretty shocked at the suggestion. The temple was known for hiding Choshu rounin and acting as a base for a lot of their operations in Kyoto. Although the temple itself was allied, they couldn't exactly defend themselves if the Shinsengumi wanted to take the temple for themselves. It was in the center of Kyoto and would disadvantage the Choshu. "Don't you think using force against monks is a bit uncouth?"

"The Choshu could not have used the temple as a base if the monks hadn't allowed it," was Hijikata's reply.

"I agree with Toshi," Kondou offered his opinion, "But Sannan does

have a valid point."

I had noticed even more than ever before that Kondou's position was nothing more than ceremonial, if that. The small bits of input he gave were comments at best and had little effect on the final decision no matter how he tried to make it look as if he'd led the discussion. I feared for the Shinsengumi as a whole for the day when he felt compelled to make his own decisions. That time wasn't so far off from now. "Impressive as always, Chief."

My skin crawled. If Itou hadn't said a word during breakfast I would have never paid him any attention. He was a snake, a rat in a room full of people who were too good for him. I knew that now than ever before. Instead of staying and listening to the bastard slyly work his way through the room, I silently excused myself to the courtyard. If anything, staying there long enough to hear him insult Sannan and knowing what was going to be said would be unbearable. Fighting the urge to deck him would be too difficult. Instead, I'm opted to get a head start on finishing the chores.

Once the captains were back and everything done and finished with, Chizuru and I joined the captains hanging around a part of the walkway to watch the sunset. I chose to sit on the steps on the opposite side of the group from Saito with Okita. We hadn't spoken since the day I first woke up, but Okita, Harada, and Chizuru had been really supportive. But even though he'd hadn't asked me about lessons, I still wore his Kodachi at my side. Saito had been avoiding me but hadn't taken it back. I felt it may be a good sign. "Itou-san is an Imperial Nationalist," Saito spoke up with an inquisitive tone, "Why would he be willing to join the Shinsengumi?"

"He's like the Choshu, then," Harada seemed to be thinking out loud, "Could someone like him get along with us?"

Hijikata sighed, "Kondou shares his views on certain things- They're both Nationalists through and through."

None of them seemed to believe that being nationalist was necessarily a bad thing, but the phrase "Blahblahblah, expel the foreigners" had always seemed to rub them the wrong way. I wanted to comment but anything I said could give something away and then when it actually happenedâ€¦ "I don't like him," Okita spoke up. I nodded along with most of the group.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Harada said, "It's just something about the way he looks at you." He's a snake, or maybe rat, that's why. Any normal person wouldn't feel comfortable with him around. It was impossible. "I feel bad for Sannan. Even his own men are avoiding him," Harada spoke up again over the murmurs of agreement. It was true that Sannan had felt extremely left out in talking about moving the Shinsengumi. Itou had used his "orator skills" and managed to not only convince Kondou but insult Sannan as a swordsman. That was unforgivable. "He's been a jerk lately. But, he wasn't always like that. Back then he was nice, at least on the surface." Nagakura cut in with a slight laugh, "Otherwise he was devious!"

"I don't get what Kondou sees in Itou," Souji seemed to be stuck on it, "Why don't you get rid of him, Hijikata? You're commander."

"Kondou would never allow it," Hijikata responded with a sigh, "Itou's probably laid some wool bullshit over his eyes. He would never allow it."

"Well damn, you're the Demon Commander of the Shinsengumi! Make it happen!"

"Okay Souji, you can be commander, then you can do it for me."

Okita scoffed, "Hell no, that'd be way too much trouble!"

If I were a man and part of the Shinsengumi, I would find a way to get Itou out as soon as possible. And before he started to show his true colors to the rest of the group. "Saito-san," Chizuru got his attention, "What do you think of Itou?"

Saito seemed to take his sweet time answering, and I wasn't going to listen to what he was going to say. The outcome would always be the same with him.

The next night, I was outside on the side of the walkway, keeping Chizuru company as she finished sweeping the yard. She normally took longer than usual on days when it was particularly nice outside. "Yukimura-san, are you nearly finished?" The mood had lifted considerably since the evening before, and everyone seemed to be in higher spirits since the dust had settled a bit from Itou's remarks against Sannan. Still yetâ€¦ I wondered how long it would be before it happened again. "Kurosawa-san," Chizuru walked up to me when she finished, "I'm going to umâ€¦ Talk to Hijikata-san about something to do with my father. I'll be back later, so please don't wait up!"

Apparently she wasn't waiting for an answer either, because she headed off to put her broom away before I could respond. My eyes narrowed, was she really going to go see Hijikata, or was it something different this time? I took off my sandals and tabi leaving them on the side of the walkway, and tied my sleeves back with the cord around my shoulders. If I was going to be sneaking around the compound, I needed to be less like a samurai and more like a ninja. I can see you, but you can't see meâ€¦ I went inside the building of the Yagi House where I knew Chizuru was going and stood against a corner while she walked in, "I never thought that it would be you who would find me here, Yukimura-kun."

Sannan. Oh no, this is bad, very bad. Silently, I drew my sword and held it in front of me, remaining in the hallway. Like everything else, this had happened far too soon. While listening in on their conversation, I considered my options. I could charge in there right now while I still had the element of surprise, and try to break the glass vial I knew he was hiding in his Obi. Or, I could wait until after he had already consumed it and started changing, then make sure to attack before he made to harm Chizuru. This was bad, very bad. Neither decision would help me plead my case in Mary Sue hell. Either I change the story dramatically, or just a bit but stillâ€¦ And even then, did I really even care about how much it changed from what I knew? A gasp louder than any other from Chizuru compelled me to enter the room, "Chizuru, stand behind me!"

I felt sense of strength in my limbs unlike any I had ever felt before as Sannan writhed around in pain before finally staring up at

us, crying for blood. Chizuru cried out as he ran at us. I pushed her away and into the wall as Sannan grabbed for my throat. In my shock I accidentally let my kodachi slide against my face before dropping to the floor- An accidental effect of my trying to get his hands away from my throat. My throat was slowly being crushed by his hands and the fact that my face hurt as well was not comforting. Perhaps in an attempt to clean me up, Sannan brought me closer to him and licked my cheek. As dire as the situation was, I could help but think about how ironically erotic that action could be in a different context. And just as I was beginning to feel as though he would surely kill me I was dropped, coughing and hacking into the ground. "Kurosawa-san!" Chizuru tried to get to me, but I held up a hand to let her know I was okay and that she should stay exactly where she was. A calm Sannan spoke more to himself than Chizuru or I, "I see I have failed."

7. Beginning of the End?

CHAPTER SIX

JUNE 1865

Three months had passed since Sannan drank the Ochimizu. Three months, we'd lived at Nishi Hongwanji. There were more rooms so it wasn't as cramped as before, but it seemed empty more than anything else. Chizuru had voiced that she grew tired more often than usually doing chores, because there was farther to walk and easy to get lost in. What really bothered me though was how much farther our rooms were to everyone else's. If anything were to happen the closest captain was Saito and well, at this point he was the last person I'd wanted to talk to. Thankfully, Harada offered to continue my training so the only thing I missed was silent conversations. Harada was sweet and had offered to listen to me whenever I had an opinion about something, but there were days where I felt like he would talk so much in the middle of training. Saito was almost always quiet, choosing to lead my example and manipulating my stance simply by moving me on his own and waiting for muscle memory to begin. It was hard not to compare the two.

Harada specialized in using a spear, but that didn't mean that he didn't know how to use a sword properly. We had run into some bumps when it came to my using my left hand and he'd once asked me if I could just start using my right hand to make it easier on him. I couldn't tell if he was serious or not. Truthfully, it would have been very easy for me as well to use my right hand since I wasn't technically left-handed, just copied from Saito. But I was still using his Kodachi, so it felt wrong to use it in any other way.

Chizuru had just returned from patrol with Heisuke's unit and I'd been bored since she'd left. There wasn't much to do today so I'd spent most of my day waiting for her to return. It was a little silly to only spend time with one person, but all the captains could ever talk about was Itou. Enough was said about him the first day he appeared. "Kurosawa-san!" I turned to see Chizuru waving from the other side of the walkway, "Could you help me with tea?" She could obviously do it herself no problem, but I could tell she'd slowly become worried for me over the last few months. I followed her to the kitchen and began prepping the water. "Chizuru, you worry about me too much," I took her hands over the tea leaves and frowned at her,

"If anything, you should be thinking more about your father and helping the Shinsengumi."

Ever since my last brush with death, she'd been even more attentive. Chizuru had completed most of the chores, choosing to wake up earlier and going to bed later to clean. She did more than enough for the both of us before I ever had a chance to do my part. She seemed to look guilty for a moment before smiling again. "Then you should be more concerned with remembering, right?"

Now I was the guilty one. The only thing I didn't remember was how I got here in the first place, not that I was over concerned about it. With the Shinsengumi, it was the first time I ever felt important or a part of something bigger than myself. Here, I was well cared for and although some relationships were more tumultuous than others there were friends, doors away from my own and more than willing to support me if I needed them. It was more than any home had ever offered. The Shinsengumi had seemed to detect that and accept it quietly as no one had brought up my sudden and questionable appearance since those first few weeks. Maybe Chizuru wasn't as perceptive. "I have no intention of leaving the Shinsengumi to discover my origins."

The bluntness of it all seemed to catch her off guard as she nearly dropped the tea leaves. "Really?"

I nodded, "Even if I had a home before this one, there is nothing that could compare to the live I'm living now. I wouldn't go back even if someone offered me a hundred billion Yen."

She nodded, acknowledging my statement for the truth it was. Yeah, how could I leave them all now, or ever? "I bet you're staying because of Okita, right?"

I blushed and pushed her hands away lightly. It was a good natured jest, but not far from the truth. Becoming attached to Okita of all people, especially considering the circumstances of my first couple of months here, had not been something I had considered a possibility. But, I found myself enjoying his teases and small smiles he would pass my way. Occasionally the thoughts of what he would say to me in the hidden corners of the compound snuck their way into everyday tasks, not completely unlike now. Chizuru dropped the subject after that.

Later in the day, I decided to go on patrol with Okita. Although wearing the Hakama that I wasn't very fond of became mandatory for these trips, spending time with the 1st division captain was quickly becoming worth it. The group remained in a comfortable silence, Okita and I exchanging glances every now and then.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: I have to admit that I have lost far too much inspiration for this story. Instead of pumping out chapter after chapter, I hit a roadblock and have since been unable to write. Since I had chapters still unpublished I figured it would be easy to just play through the game or watch the anime again and perhaps refresh my adoration for this story but nothing so far. This is super unfair to the story so I will keep writing until I feel it come to an appropriate end. But, chapters may be published farther

apart than usual and be shorter. Maybe after all this is over, I'll go back and try to edit it justly but for now... I'll take what I can get. Thanks so much for your support thus far!

Also please keep in mind that even after this story is completed and the Shinsengumi arc is over, Kagami's story will continue, so please continue to support this OC that is so close to my own heart!

End
file.